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Operational activities of the United Nations for international development cooperation: poverty eradication and capacity-building: follow-up to policy recommendations of the General Assembly

Integrated and coordinated implementation of and follow-up to major United Nations conferences and summits

Non-governmental organizations

Statement submitted by the International Federation of Settlements and Neighbourhood Centres, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 26 July 1996.

GE.99-64230 (E)

Mr. Chairman, I thank you for giving me this opportunity to address the Economic and Social Council during its current session. I am speaking on behalf of the International Federation of Settlements and Neighbourhood Centres (IFS), which is an international association accredited to the Council in the general category. IFS is an international social service organization which provides services to people in need in 61 countries. The following statement also reflects the views of the Non-Governmental Organization Committee on Social Development.

We are particularly concerned with items 3 (a) and (b) dealing with "poverty eradication and capacity-building" and "follow-up to policy recommendations of the General Assembly" in the field of social development, in particular we are concerned with item 6 which relates to the follow-up of major United Nations conferences and summits. Finally, we also wish to express our views concerning item 12, dealing with non-governmental organizations.

With respect to poverty eradication, the primary role of settlement houses and many other non-governmental organizations is to alleviate the social precarity for those living in poverty. From a practical point of view services rendered at the local level are an essential tool to achieve social protection. For this purpose we urge the United Nations system to broaden its definition of social services so as to incorporate other vital services in addition to basic health and education. Comprehensive basic services should include strengthening of community organizations, provision of services specially designed for vulnerable populations, such as battered women's shelters, treatment for substance abuse, programmes for people living with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and the acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), day care for single-parent families, mental health treatment, services for the elderly, provision of activities for all age groups, and specialized services for immigrants and refugees. Not all of these are adequately covered under the definitions for health and education. Moreover, when the United Nations discusses education it tends to marginalize vocational education, which is an essential factor in increasing productive employment. Appropriate training is needed to meet the employment needs of vulnerable people, as well as associated welfare programmes and related social work services. IFS and many non-governmental organizations are prepared to contribute their own experience in devising and operating such programmes, usually on a voluntary basis, both to international agencies and interested Governments.

Another area of concern is the availability of funds for grants and low-interest loans to assist people to fight poverty. Credit unions and other forms of micro-credit frequently can assist people to create micro-enterprises. Such activities have been carried out by settlement houses in their neighbourhoods for many years. They frequently have the mechanisms required by banks to make funds available and to ensure accountability and repayment. IFS is therefore urging that serious consideration be given by the various banks and funding agencies, especially those working in the developing countries, to using appropriate non-governmental organizations in the dispensing of funds for the development of small enterprises in local

communities. This aspect of community financing seems to have been largely ignored in the programmes currently being developed by banks and related financial agencies.

In the follow-up of the major conferences and, in particular, of the World Summit for Social Development, non-governmental organizations can also play a more positive role than has been attributed to them in the past. Non-governmental organizations have long experience in evaluating and reporting their own programmes. Sophisticated tools have been developed primarily to satisfy the requirements of donors. Such tools enable many non-governmental organizations to analyse their own projects, frequently making use of outside experts. For example, many settlement houses have cooperated in establishing teams which go into local communities and assess the success or failure of specific projects and programmes. IFS, based on its own experience, therefore urges that this form of follow-up and evaluation be included in the current agenda being worked out for the five-year review of the achievement of the goals of the Summit and the other follow-up conferences. IFS would like to be included in the planning process and long-term follow-up. Local branches of IFS and probably other non-governmental organizations would be available to work with their Governments (including local authorities) in developing such evaluation programmes.

IFS urges the Economic and Social Council to make more extensive use of non-governmental organizations in obtaining reports on conditions in areas where programmes are being undertaken to alleviate poverty. We believe that non-governmental organization reports should be included in all national reports that are requested for the follow-up mechanisms.

One of the mechanisms for monitoring and follow-up to the United Nations conferences is the use of social indicators. Non-governmental organizations have watched with great interest the preparations for the Technical Conference on Indicators and have participated in providing their own experience in this field. They have stressed that there should be more recognition of qualitative indicators based on sampling and interviewing local communities rather than the current dependence on quantitative indicators. We hope the Economic and Social Council will adopt this approach in the planning for the five-year review of the achievement of the goals of the Summit and the other world conferences.

In another field, the work of the United Nations as well as the International Labour Organization and the International Organization of Migration has developed a constructive approach to the migration issue as a whole. IFS participated in the Technical Symposium held in the Netherlands and found itself somewhat isolated as a non-governmental organization providing absorption services and dealing with the special social problems of migrants and their families. The only other non-governmental organizations represented, including the World Council of Churches, deal primarily with bringing the problems of migration to the attention of Governments. We hope that the somewhat tentative plans for a full migration conference will materialize and that IFS can be a partner in the process.

In a somewhat unrelated area, IFS urges that more attention be given to the role of young people not only in the area of poverty alleviation, but also in the major follow-up activities of the conferences. At the present time, it appears to us that the youth programmes of the United Nations and in particular, the Braga Youth Forum and the Lisbon Conference of Ministers, have been sidelined and we hope there will be closer liaison established between the machinery for follow-up of the Lisbon and other United Nations conferences. It is after all the future generation which is going to have to take over.

With respect to the item on non-governmental organizations, IFS wishes to put on record its appreciation of the work done by the Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations during the current year and its more open approach to non-governmental organization participation. We appreciate the volume of work required under the accreditation system and strongly support the efforts being made by the Committee to expedite the process and to assure itself of the validity of non-governmental organizations' requests. We understand fully the need for the establishment and enforcement of rules to guide both the accreditation and the activities of the non-governmental organizations. We are happy to work with the Committee in exploring how far the guidelines for accreditation of Council non-governmental organizations can be applied in obtaining access to the United Nations and other areas. We hope that the Committee will assist us in our dealings with other areas of the United Nations.

We also hope that the Committee will give more serious attention to the content of the quadrennial reports. They should be a challenge, both to the non-governmental organizations concerned and to the Committee as a tool for serious evaluation of each non-governmental organization.